

# WALKING ALONG THE BORDERSCAPE: BORDERWALK AS A METHOD OF PRESENTING AND COLLECTING DATA

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Since the fall of 2021, the space of the Polish–Belarusian border has been highly militarized and weaponized. Tourist paths through the forest began to invisibly intersect the route of irregularized migration. The article introduces the concept of “borderwalk” as a method for presenting and generating data as well as an analysis of the borderscape. The embodied experience of collective walking serves a cognitive purpose while fostering solidarity with people on the move and other actors of the border crisis. Drawing on our experience from over twenty walks with researchers, students, activists, and journalists, we propose a methodological reflection that can serve as a guide through both the border landscape and the method itself. We walk the reader through the key points of the borderwalk – the wall, the forest, and the cemetery – highlighting ethical dilemmas as they unfold.

Keywords: landscape, borderscape, borderwalk, irregularized migration, Polish–Belarusian border, border violence

## INTRODUCTION

Since the summer of 2021, when the humanitarian crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border began, the surrounding area has undergone significant changes. The borderline was first fortified with a concertina razor wire fence, and later with a metal wall additionally

reinforced with technological elements. The practices of uniformed services, as an element of borderwork (Brambilla 2015), are its extension, and reach from the borderline deep into the landscape creating the borderscape (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Krichker 2021), which has been an important subject of local knowledge production in recent years (Krępa 2022; Pietrusińska 2022; Bloch 2023; Krępa and Judzińska 2023; Krępa and Mondal 2023; Tymińska 2023; Yeliseyeu 2023; Zessin-Jurek 2023; Straczuk 2024; Fiatkowska and Judzińska 2025). The migration route through the Polish–Belarusian border is still active (We Are Monitoring 2024, 2025; We Are Monitoring et al. 2024). In Podlaskan forests, tourist paths invisibly cross asylum seeker routes. Items left behind – often forcibly abandoned – serve as reminders of the presence of people on the move and their struggles. Researchers and activists have been studying and reflecting on the process of militarization on the Polish borderland since its very outset. Dynamic and continuous changes in the border landscape led to questions about how best to share the knowledge produced on and around the border while mobilizing solidarity around the issue. Rapid changes in the borderscape created a need to observe, document, analyze, and pass on knowledge about them.

To achieve this, we decided to attempt walking through the borderspace and invite others for collective reflection. As activists providing humanitarian support to people on the move and members of the *Badaczk i Badacze na Granicy / Researchers on the Border* initiative, we became more and more familiar with the space that was completely unknown to us before the crisis started. Because of our positionalities, we also had access to knowledge that had been produced, a critical approach and an activist toolbox that supported us in creating a framework for the borderwalk. Since March 2023, we conducted nearly 20 walks in the border area with up to forty researchers, students, journalists, and activists, in both Polish and English. Each borderwalk, lasting approximately three hours, focused on three main points, which we discuss in the following sections. We followed the direction of people on the move, from the borderline and the wall inland. Because of large distances between the points (fifteen kilometers), the walk was partially done by car.

While walking, we described the surrounding areas based on our research findings, alongside insights from other activist-researchers. During the walk, various interactions occurred – border guards encountered in the forest would follow or break strict scripts, conversations with members of the local community would provide information, new elements of the borderscape would become the subject of research and documentation. In this way, the data produced during the walk may feed into subsequent walks and, more broadly, contributes to knowledge on the spatial dimension of border regimes. The proposed borderwalk thus functions both as a research method and as a means of presenting data.

In this article, we introduce the method of borderwalk that emerged from the experience of regular collective walking through the borderscape. First, we explain our understanding of the space of the border that directed our gaze towards certain material elements,

practices, and processes. Second, we share our methodological approach to walking, paying special attention to the ethical dilemmas around moving through the space of violence and struggle. Then, we introduce the reader to the main points of the walk: the wall, the forest, and the cemetery. We provide insights into some of the narratives we shared with the walkers while highlighting the practical implementation of our proposed methodology.

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF BORDERWALK: INSPIRATION AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

### FROM THE BORDERSCAPE AND BORDERWORK TO BORDERWALK

In this article, as in the walk, we construct our understanding of the borderspace drawing on the category of borderscape. According to Dina Krichker (2021), borderscape was introduced into border studies through the work of Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr in 2007. Earlier, it was used in geographical studies, landscape studies, and research in the field of art. In the context of border studies, or more broadly, migration studies, borderscape defines a space as well as a set of practices. It was constructed on the Lefebvrian concept of the production of space (Lefebvre 1991) through objects and practices that fill this space and influence its production. It was also inspired by the Appadurain concept of the spatialization of static categories by adding the suffix -scape (such as ethnoscape, mediascape, etc.) (dell’Agnese and Szary 2015).

The operationalization of the term occurs at the intersection of several important factors. Its analytical power is primarily influenced by its intuitiveness and plasticity. Borderscape takes into account spatial characteristics of the place in question, although it is not itself strictly territorially defined and limited. In other words, it can change in time and is not strictly defined by its proximity to a national border (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Krichker 2021). In addition to space itself, borderscape consists of objects, items, people, and animals other than humans.

In subsequent reflections on the use of the concept, researchers emphasized other elements relevant for their analyses, thus broadening the meaning of the term. In 2015, Chiara Brambilla pointed out that when considering borderscape, one should pay equal attention to representation, visibility, and experience of different actors (Brambilla 2015). The concept is relevant in exploring transit spaces – territories that are not the starting point or the destination of the journey. In general, as Krichker argues, “conceptualisations of the borderscapes approach open unlimited space for any research dealing with social interactions in the border context” (Krichker 2021: 7; see also Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Brambilla 2015), thus highlighting the dimension of power relations and state violence.

In critical border studies, this set of practices is often referred to as borderwork. The concept was introduced by Chris Rumford (2008) and defined by Brambilla as “repressive and emancipatory forms of b/ordering, both the actions of states bordering their territories and the counter-movements of citizens seeking to overcome the repressive border regimes caused by state actions” (Brambilla 2021: 14). Taking into account the reflection on spatiality elaborated above, we decided to name our method of conducting research and presenting data borderwalk.

## WHAT IS BORDERWALK?

As we walk with groups through the borderscape, we disseminate knowledge produced by researchers on various aspects of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border, as well as reflections and analyses by activists. The borderwalk script, which forms the basis of the walk, is rooted in our understanding of the context, stemming from our engagement in humanitarian interventions, as well as the extensive literature on the multicultural history of Podlasie, transnational border regimes, and migration. During regular observations of the locations with the groups or during preparatory visits, we noticed the changing border landscape and practices of the authorities, which we later incorporated into subsequent walks. The content of the walk that we propose – shaped by the course of the walk and the interventions of the co-walkers and other actors involved – predisposes it to disrupt the dominant narrative and representation of the borderscape (Tuck and McKenzie 2014; Springgay and Truman 2019) while mobilizing solidarity with people on the move. During the borderwalk, new knowledge is produced on the basis of conversations initiated by our contributions, of elements of the space, or references to other border locations. This new knowledge is generated *in situ*, and it later enriches research and activist reflections.

The borderwalk always takes place in the Podlasie region. Material objects and practices that constitute the borderscape are discussed within their political and social dimensions, influenced by local events, as well as by the processes of colonization, globalization, environmental degradation, and capitalism (Tuck and McKenzie 2014; Springgay and Truman 2022). Walking in proximity to the border connects the body, mind, and environment, fostering an understanding of the space through lived experience (Springgay and Truman 2018; Mason et al. 2023). Visual elements of the wall, the humidity or coolness of the forest, the awareness of movement on uneven dirt paths, and the feeling of bodily fatigue (O’Neill and Roberts 2019) may lead to new questions and realizations. Some of these questions and realizations may remain unspoken and contribute to knowledge produced outside the Polish–Belarusian borderscape. Others are discussed with us between locations. Despite inviting people to experience the borderscape that people on the move navigate, at the beginning of the walk, we acknowledge our inability to grasp the experience of migrating through the border and forest. To avoid appropriation, the walk does

not imitate a migration route or include survival elements. It takes place during the day on easy paths so as to address these ethical dilemmas, potential safety concerns, and the discomfort of those walking with us. We walk at a moderate pace, although the weather or border-related situations may slow us down. The latter include mobile checkpoints or situations when someone from the group needs to leave the borderwalk to join an urgent humanitarian intervention or follow up on an earlier one.

Walking, whether as a daily activity or a research method, is neither neutral nor convivial. Hence, the necessity to question who gets to walk in a space, under whose terms, and what paths they take (Springgay and Truman 2019). When walking with the groups, we acknowledge our privilege of mobility. We traverse officially designated routes: tourist trails or roads. For people on the move crossing this area on foot, walking is something to endure (Middleton in Mason et al. 2023), usually away from paths, often through dense forest. This is the result of people crossing the Polish border in an irregularized way (Hameršak 2022) being compelled to travel unnoticed, which is often their only strategy to continue their journey and evade further pushbacks (We Are Monitoring 2024). In a sense, our presence as walkers, visitors, and tourists reinforces the binary between those who possess the privilege of mobility and those who are forced to remain hidden.

Walking, like other methods of knowledge production, is interlaced with power relations. Positionality and personal stories significantly influence how the borderwalk and the borderscape are experienced and understood (Tuck and McKenzie 2014). The walk involves potential risks and interruptions (Martinez and Gois 2022), especially for people whose bodies the authorities may consider as resembling those on the move through this border. They may be brought about by border guards being persistently present during our walks, asking questions about the purpose of our visit, or performing quick or thorough ID checks. We can hypothesize that these interruptions play a role in reproducing power and reinstating control over the borderscape, even though we walk in areas where movement is not restricted. It is also an element of racialization of non-white bodies immediately identifiable as a threat to the integrity of white hegemony of the territory. In fact, a person's non-whiteness often leads to questions and checks by the uniformed services. In this way, non-white tourists face racism from the police, border guards, or the army. However, "recognizing" a person as the "Other" by their appearance ("the surface") is nothing new in Poland. In the aftermath of the largest European genocide – the Holocaust – it has not been mobilized in Poland. Thus, another factor (renewed after the 1940s) is at play – the production of whiteness as affirmative and having more rights and privileges than outsiders (Fiatkowska and Judzińska 2025). As the groups walking with us become increasingly diverse and as more participants have experienced migration (including irregularized), it needs to be accounted for during the borderwalk, leaving space for reflection around questions of safety and care.

Other ethical dilemmas result from the presence (or absence) of Subjects and their role in shaping the narrative. When considering walks through "difficult spaces" marked by

(state) oppression or inequalities, which aim to make participants aware of the situation, the political context, and resistance practices, dilemmas often arise from encountering residents of the area being visited – whether it be a marginalized neighborhood in Rio or villages in the Palestinian West Bank – and from the ways in which power relations are (re)produced through such interactions. The people whose reality walkers are getting a sneak peek into are often unable to leave the space, while visitors have the privilege of “walking away” (Mason et al. 2023). Visitors access places that are off-limits to the inhabitants. Jennifer Lynn Kelly aptly refers to this as “asymmetrical mobility” (2016) in the context of solidarity tours in Palestine and the confinement of Palestinians due to residency restrictions and checkpoints. During our borderwalk in Podlasie, a dilemma arises from a different issue – the absence of Subjects. Even if led by Subjects themselves – such as Palestinian activists in the West Bank, inhabitants of the Kibera slum, sex workers in the red-light district in Amsterdam, or Syrian refugees in Berlin – some walks have been criticized for commodifying and romanticizing poverty or struggles (Frenzel 2012; Huysamen et al. 2020). Nevertheless, residents are entitled to invite (or not invite) visitors to their home or neighborhood and narrate their own stories. Despite existing power imbalances, they retain control over their narratives, dispensing with experiences of fear and humiliation that often serve as resources for activism (Griffiths 2017), as well as stories of agency. In Podlasie, walkers do not directly encounter first-person narratives because people, while on the move, are in no position to speak for themselves or participate in efforts to create a counter-narrative.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that we do not walk into homes and shelters but mostly stroll through forests and public roads does not shield us from risks associated with being a visitor. Those of us who traverse the borderscape regularly and are repeatedly confronted with spaces of violence may even become accustomed to them, risking normalization. The beauty of the forest, can become mesmerizing and even a source of entertainment. The group setting may enhance these processes or be a source of distraction itself. Conversely, it can facilitate self- and collective reflection, balancing appreciation for the surroundings with the learning and solidarity objectives of the visit. The diversity within groups can give rise to new questions, revealing political dynamics and leading to a more nuanced, intersectional understanding. Or, when joined by a large number of co-walkers, these individual multi-layered perspectives may be obliterated (Mason et al. 2023). Nevertheless, walking with others takes on a different significance in places where violence is present and rights are applied selectively. By acting together and walking with a purpose, we can reestablish our presence and reclaim the space, even if only for a brief moment.

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that since our first borderwalk, more people who crossed this border have settled in Poland and regularized their stay and could potentially be included in our walk. While we do not refuse such cooperation in the future, so far, we have kept developing this method exploring the space through our perspective. We assume that the issue of systemic violence, border regimes, and exclusionary mechanisms is a matter for the majority group as well, hence, this walk is also our attempt to take responsibility for the actions taken by the Polish government.

## THE BORDER WALL

The 418 km long Polish–Belarusian border lies on a north-south line, on both land and rivers. Before Belarus gained its independence on 25 August 1991, the very same border divided Poland and the Soviet Union. Only one part of this border, 172 km of the course of the Bug River between Niemirów and Sobibor, is an older border. Between 1939 and 1941 this was the demarcation line between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. After declaring its independence, Belarus inherited the Soviet Union border infrastructure, commonly referred to as the *sistema* (ru. система). The strengthening of the border by the Soviet Union was a way to secure the country against escapes to the West and the threat of counter-revolutionary currents (Chandler 1998), which began much earlier – as early as 1917. Today, the *sistema* is a system of border security, located in a depopulated strip of land along the border, protruding from 500 meters to as much as two kilometers into the territory. The system consists of several rows of two-meter-high fences made of barbed wire and an electronic system (hence its common name), mostly C-175 “Gardina”. Installed in 1980 to replace an older system of border protection, C-100 “Skala”, Gardina was commissioned the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with the later-to-be First Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev as one of its members at the time. Subsequently, after Gorbachev became First Secretary, the border protection system was partly modernized to KC-185 “Gobi”, still in operation on the Polish–Belarusian border (alongside “Gardina”). Several years later, on October 15, 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev became the laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize.

For the Arabic-speaking users of the route, this place stands as a separate space and is called *muharrama* – the forbidden place. Before the border crisis began in the region, the state border line itself was not reinforced in any way. It was marked only by colored border posts. The border markers also included concrete and metal markers inlaid into the ground, indicating the course of the exact line on the ground. Hence, when the group of people on the move appeared in Usnarz Górny in 2021, border guards – supported by the Polish army – began nervously unrolling coils of concertina razor wire.<sup>2</sup> The “makeshift” concertina fence became the first physical barrier on the Polish side in many years.

Three months after the symbolic beginning of the humanitarian crisis,<sup>3</sup> the Polish state decided to further fortify its border. On October 14, 2021, the lower chamber of the Polish

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<sup>2</sup> On July 8, 2021, the 3rd Regional Logistic Base of the Polish Army in Kraków submitted an enquiry under the public procurement procedure for the supply of razor wire to “secure” the state border. The tender was won by GC Metal Sp. z o.o., which agreed to supply 12,000 packages, each of which was approximately 10–15 meters of wire. By the end of 2021, the Polish army had spent PLN 130,519,734.02. In 2022, it was PLN 104,413,043.07. The razor wire was sold to the army by such companies as Internet Fence, Metalzbyt Hurt, Partner Systems, Nordic Production Group and Metal Market. Steel for its production came from the UK, India, Ukraine and Russia, among others. See more in Judzińska 2025.

<sup>3</sup> August 2021 is considered the symbolic beginning of the humanitarian crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border. It was then that a group of 32 Afghans sat in a meadow to protest being pushed back to Belarus and being denied the right to apply for international protection yet again.

Parliament (Sejm), passed the Construction of State Border Protection Act in less than five minutes.<sup>4</sup> Two weeks later, the act was signed by the President. The project and the technical sketches were prepared in just five days by Orlen Project S.A., a subsidiary of PKN ORLEN, a leading petrochemical company. At the time, it was headed by Daniel Obajtek, who was affiliated with the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party. The urgency of the matter was used as an excuse to bypass standard procedures for public investments and select contractors without a bidding process.

The lack of tender for the construction of the barrier rightfully raised suspicion regarding more political connections – the leaders of companies-perpetrators were members or enthusiastic supporters of the Law and Justice party<sup>5</sup> Within a few months, a 187-kilometre fence, 5.5 meters high and topped with half a meter of concertina razor wire was constructed. The project required 50,000 tons of steel, 40,000 steel spans, and 38,800 poles. The initial investment cost was PLN 1.6 billion (approximately 400 million euros). To put this into context, the amount could have covered a 12-month individual integration program for asylum seekers who were granted refugee status for nearly 92,000 people. The initial construction was merely the beginning. The sum does not include the salaries and allowances for soldiers, border guards, police officers, and members of territorial defense forces.<sup>6</sup> We must also account for ongoing maintenance costs and further “improvements” to both the physical barrier and the electronic systems. The electronic systems will receive additional “upgrades” funded by a support package of 52 million euros that the European Union allocated to Poland, as well as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway in December 2024. The amount of money spent and earned on the border infrastructure makes us note that the Polish–Belarusian borderscape is part

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<sup>4</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220915064005/https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/agent.xsp?symbol=listaglos&IdDnia=1862>.

<sup>5</sup> Steel spans were produced by Polimex-Mostostal SA, Mostostal Siedlce, and Węglokoks, while the construction was coordinated by Budimex and a consortium of companies including Unibep and Budrex. The electronic barrier was primarily built by Elektrotim and developed by Telbud. For example, Tomasz Hapunowicz, the president of Mostostal Siedlce, served as the chairman of the board for the Law & Justice party in Siedlce, while its vice-president Mariusz Gruda was a key supporter of the local Law & Justice campaign in the same city. Additionally, Sławomir Brzeziński, the vice-president of Węglokoks, was a former Law & Justice councilor from Opole.

<sup>6</sup> The Territorial Defense Forces (in Polish, Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej – WOT, also known as “*terytorialsi*”) is a part-time, volunteer organization. Although it may resemble a paramilitary group, it is the fifth military branch of the Polish Armed Forces, established in 2017 by Antoni Macierewicz, the Minister of Defense. Its official goal is to protect and support local communities during both peace and crisis situations, such as natural disasters or armed conflicts. Its right-wing orientation is in its core – the active role in strengthening patriotic and Christian values – is written in their mission. Basic training lasts only 16 days, which can be shortened to 8 days for reservists. After three years of training, “*terytorialsi*” are certified as ready for combat. The concept of this branch is to combine professional life with military activities, so trainings are typically organized on weekends. In addition to two days of training per month, members must complete 14 days of integrated training. Both types of training also take place along the Polish–Belarusian border, where WOT personnel are seen patrolling the area on land and using drones to monitor and violently capture people on the move. While service is voluntary, it does come with financial benefits. In 2025, around 40,000 members can expect to receive 600 PLN per month for combat readiness and between 169 and 415 PLN per day of service, depending on their rank.

of the border regime and global governance, producing social hierarchies of migrants and irregularized modes of movement, by restricting legitimate ways of travelling (Walia 2021). It is intertwined with the capitalist system, as private companies, including Polish firms, join a list of corporations — often linked to the military industry — that advocate for further fortification of Europe for their own benefit (Davis 2015; Benedicto et al. 2020; Cowan 2021).

During the borderwalk, we approach the wall, maintaining the allowed distance of 15 meters from the border line. Currently (June 2025) we cannot come closer than 200 meters. In June 2024, the current government reintroduced and then extended (temporarily and geographically) the “no entry zone”.<sup>7</sup> As we often discuss with our fellow walkers, even being near the fence does not provide a true sense of its size. In this case, the soldiers patrolling the area may “come in handy” as their height can become a point of reference. Alternatively, the two-meter-tall red and white border post can also serve this purpose. The location offers a good vantage point to observe the border technology, including thousands of day-night and thermal imaging cameras. At this stage of our borderwalk, we analyze the extensive network of cables connected to sensor detectors, camera traps in the forest, and drones that make up the complex system of surveillance and control. All these elements aim to additionally “arm” the natural landscape of the primary forest that is being used as an instrument to deter people on the move from crossing (Hameršak and Pleše 2022).

During each borderwalk, we make sure to observe new developments, including those introduced by the government formed in December 2023. This government did not dismantle the wall or strengthen human rights protections; instead, it constructed a razor wire fence just ten meters away from the existing metal barrier. The new fence created an additional obstacle for people on the move and established another area where both they and law enforcement are confined.<sup>8</sup> The government also made numerous attempts

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<sup>7</sup> In September 2021, a state of emergency was declared in certain parts of the Podlaskie and Lublin voivodships – marking the first such declaration since martial law was introduced in 1981. The no-entry zone included 183 settlements and was accessible only to the residents living within the area, effectively barring journalists, NGO workers, and others seeking to support people on the move from entering. The duration of this no-entry zone was extended multiple times (in violation of the regulations contained in the Polish constitution, which allowed for a maximum of three months of a state of emergency) until June 2022. Initially, this extension was justified on constitutional grounds, followed by a ministerial regulation. Eventually, the State Border Protection Act was amended, allowing for the creation of no-entry zones without the need to declare a state of emergency. On June 13, 2024, Donald Tusk’s government utilized this amended act to establish a “buffer zone”, which now ranged from 200 meters to two kilometers from the border.

<sup>8</sup> On May 28, 2024, Sergeant Mateusz Sitek was stabbed by a person from the other side of the border barrier while on patrol on a strip of the border road near the village of Dubicze Cerkiewne. Due to the impossibility of rapid access (a second fence along the border road) by medical services and evacuation of the injured person from the scene (which took about an hour), the soldier died in the hospital after a few days. However, this was not the only soldier to die at the border: previously (November 2021 and January 2022), two soldiers died as a result of accidentally shooting themselves, a soldier and a female soldier died in car accidents involving the army (May and October 2023), two soldiers committed suicide (May 2022, January 2025), and one soldier died after consuming too much alcohol (November 2021). According to the data collected by the Border Deaths Monitoring Group, a total of eight serving Polish soldiers died at the border.

to improve the functionality of the porous fence by adding horizontal spans to the wall, preventing individuals from passing through. Discussing all these elements reveals that the fence and its adjustments do not stop people on the move; instead, they make their journey more perilous (Kojder and Kramer 2025; MSF 2025). Without romanticizing or ignoring structural factors behind migration, we consider how crossing the wall by people on the move and entering a space that is, in theory, inaccessible, can be viewed as an act that challenges and contests the border regime.

In some locations, we can direct the attention of the walkers to one of the hundred “service gates”, which activists have termed “pushback gates”. These gates are routinely used by Polish border guards to forcibly expel those seeking asylum in the European Union. Testimonies collected by the We Are Monitoring Association (2024, 2025) exposed the brutality of Polish uniformed services. They report individuals being struck on the head, face, and back with batons and metal bars, sprayed with gas, and threatened with weapons immediately upon capture. This violent treatment is often followed by body searches, which may be conducted naked and in the cold. The process is accompanied by threats and insults before individuals are taken to border guard stations or directly pushed back through the wall. On the other side, again in the *sistema*, people on the move find themselves exhausted, beaten, and injured, often separated from their families or travel companions and deprived of their phones and personal belongings.

In Poland, contrary to international law, pushbacks were first sanctioned in October 2021<sup>9</sup> and subsequently by the suspension of the right to apply for asylum, which was signed by President Andrzej Duda on March 27, 2025 and took effect the following day. Still, pushbacks are mostly conducted without external witnesses.<sup>10</sup> During the borderwalk, we notice border guards, the army, and other, often masked authorities, patrolling the borderline in vehicles or stationed at provisional posts. Our presence often attracts their attention, resulting in routine or nervous inquiries about the purpose of our visit and sometimes calls for additional reinforcements. In such cases, after a brief exchange, we usually continue our narration by explaining the process of border fortification and practices producing the borderscape, often standing in proximity to the officers. Even when there are no uniformed services in the vicinity of our group, one of the surveillance cameras will alert them to our presence. When asked during the borderwalk, we inform border guards about the research purpose of our visit, mentioning our academic affiliations. This

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<sup>9</sup> In October 2021, the so-called “pushback law” came into force. This law sanctioned the *status quo* requiring persons who crossed the border in an undocumented way to leave the country and banned them from reentering the territory of Poland and other Schengen area countries. It also entitled border guard officers to “escort these people to the state border”.

<sup>10</sup> There are, however, posts on social media by people on the move and videos published by Belarusian border guards. See, for example: *Государственный пограничный комитет Республики Беларусь – State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus* (further GPK), *Насилие польских служб в отношении беженцев не прекращается* [Violence by Polish services against refugees continues without end], July 29, 2023, <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/152749/>; GPK, *Польские службы продолжают ночью вывозить беженцев на границу* [Polish services continue to push refugees to the border at night], July 24, 2023 <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/152694/>

typically ends the conversation, but it may be followed by an ID check, which may be extended by no internet connection or the meticulousness of the officer. We perceive these interactions as safe, taking place in a familiar environment during daylight hours in a publicly accessible space. However, we recognize that such encounters may evoke different emotions in our co-walkers, especially those who experienced police or military brutality at borders or elsewhere. Therefore, we have been more cautious in informing participants about potential interruptions and risks before and during the walk. We assure our co-walkers that we know how to respond when such encounters occur and that we can offer emotional support during or after the event.

## THE FOREST

Our borderwalk is conducted in the Polish part of Puszcza Białowieska. The 150 ha (1,500 m<sup>2</sup>) area located on the Polish and Belarusian territory is the size of London and larger than Delhi. It is one of the last primary forests in Europe, which includes extensive undisturbed areas where natural processes have been on-going for centuries. Puszcza Białowieska was the first environmental site that appeared on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979. It is the best preserved natural deciduous and mixed forest in the European Lowlands. The largest portion is occupied by wet-ground forests with oaks and hornbeams. Ols (swampy alder forest) and swampy meadows grow on periodically flooded areas, whereas dry areas are home to pine, spruce, and mixed woods. The most valuable area – strict reserve – lies in the fork of the rivers Hwoźna and Narewka (to the north and west), Białowieża (to the south), and the Belarusian border (to the east). It is home to 59 mammal species (including wolves, European bison, lynxes, boars), over 250 bird species, 13 amphibians, 7 reptiles, and over 12,000 invertebrates. The national park covers some of the areas (including the strict reserve), but not all areas of Białowieża Forest are under protection, which, a few years ago, led to social drama. In 2016, the Minister of Environment, Jan Szyszko, announced that he would approve the tripling of logging in the forest. At that time, hundreds of people started protesting and physically blocking logging under the motto “Camp for the Forest” (*Obóz dla Puszczy*). Activists established networks and bases in the area, which were also mobilized four years later during the current humanitarian crisis.

Militarization has significantly affected wildlife in the region. Army vehicles speeding through forests full of animals have so far killed at least three bison, but the number of animals that died due to the wounds inflicted by the border infrastructure is unknown (Niech Żyją! 2024). Belarusian border guards<sup>11</sup> report that, on their side of the border,

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<sup>11</sup> GPK, *53 жертва европейской колючки: на границе с Литвой обнаружен павший лось* [53 victim of the European barb: a fallen moose was found on the border with Lithuania], May 27, 2025, <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/167281/>

at least 53 large mammals died entangling themselves in razor wire. The border fence prevents the migration of larger mammals (bison, moose, deer, wolves, lynxes), and the continued presence of the army in the area significantly affects animal activity (Nowak et al. 2025; Schmidt et al. 2025). Moreover, military vehicles, as well as building vehicles during the construction of the wall, brought invasive plant seeds into the reserve areas, which had not been seen previously.

People on the move walk through the forest. Due to the refusal to accept asylum applications since the beginning of the crisis in 2021, and now due to the almost complete suspension of the right to apply for international protection in Poland,<sup>12</sup> people on the move have been forced to cross the so-called green border and to hide deep in the forest. The refusal to accept asylum applications has another consequence – due to white hegemony and omnipresent racial profiling, people on the move cannot use public transportation and are forced to accept the services of smugglers, which are several dozen times more expensive. In this way, the Polish state contributes to the grey market in trafficking, while compromising the precarious safety of travelers.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to move along tourist paths – their presence could be reported to the services (Hajdarowicz 2025). Therefore, forests in Podlasie are patrolled daily by border guards, the army, and drones and helicopters are dispatched to areas difficult to access. People on the move thus travel through the forest, often using very extensive paths made by large animals. Traversing the forest in this way is slightly easier and allows a little more safety. Such a journey sometimes lasts a dozen or even more than twenty kilometers in fear of getting caught and pushed back to Belarus at every step. Sometimes it is divided into parts, and when people on the move need support on the journey, activist groups with humanitarian assistance are called in.

In her article on the lethality of border regimes, Estela Schindel (2022), introduces a reflection on natural factors involved in border violence. She writes about political production of exposure to the elements, defining the spaces as slow violence spaces, where humans rely on the absolute power of nature combined with often unfavorable atmospheric conditions for the human organism. An extreme example of slow violence spaces is Jason De León's concept of the weaponization of landscape (De León 2015). De León states that border regime services intentionally push people to choose much more dangerous places to move through – in De León's case the uninhabited and extremely hot Sonoran Desert, and, in the example of the Polish–Belarusian border, wetland areas.

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<sup>12</sup> However, the law provides for exceptions allowing applications. These include, but are not limited to unaccompanied minors, pregnant women, the elderly or those in poor health, persons whose health and life is at risk in the country from which they came directly (in this case, Belarus). Although each of these conditions is met in the case of nearly every person crossing the Polish–Belarusian border in an undocumented way, applications are rarely accepted, and the most popular interaction of Polish services with asylum seekers is pushback.

When a group stays one, two, and sometimes three or more nights hiding in the forest, they leave behind a variety of objects in their place of stay. Andrea Lauser (2022) argues that the border is not just a bounded structure, but is shaped, negotiated, and transformed during daily interactions in the network of people's relationships with objects and their material surroundings. In an article from the beginning of the crisis relating to the materiality and spatiality of the then newly established route, the authors proposed a typology of spaces and objects (Judzińska and Sendyka 2022). Particularly in the first two years of the crisis, it was noticeable that certain groups of objects recurred in strictly defined types of space. After many months of photographic documentation, the researchers were able to propose two typologies. The first one refers to spaces in the forest where people on the move spend some time and leave some of their items. What defines the type of camp is its content, its location, the time the group spent in it, as well as how they left the space.

The station camp, which is one of the points of our borderwalk, represents a space that completes the forest part of the journey of those who have decided to follow this route. This is the place where they leave most of their belongings. Objects (clothing, shoes) that help people to cross the forest and are left at the station camp are referred to as "supporting objects". These objects, are "a material aid used not in the process of self-expression, but to increase the chances of completing the journey successfully and safely" (Judzińska and Sendyka 2022: 15). In this way, by merely observing the objects, the agency of people on the move can be "read".

During the borderwalk, we and our co-walkers approach an area where people on the move left their belongings. To do so and maintain our ethical standards, we have knowledge of several locations, from which we select the best for the day in question. We do it in consultation with humanitarian activist groups, who tell us where there is likely to be less or no movement of asylum seekers at that point. Upon reaching the location, we begin with providing information on what the clandestine movement through the forest looks like. We talk about humanitarian interventions and how the agency of people on the move can be read through the objects they have left. After the narrative part, people are encouraged to take a brief walk through the forest on their own among the abandoned rain jackets, wellingtons, sleeping bags, warm socks, and thermals. Before that, however, we make a very important remark— that they should not move the objects, even if they are abandoned. This aims to underscore the connotations of violence associated with being forced to leave the objects behind in the forest. These objects, then, become a material witness (Grzybowska et al. 2020), which testifies to state violence towards asylum seekers.

## THE CEMETERY

Let us return for a moment to the beginning of the 20th century, to other historically important events. Before Poland regained its independence in 1918, this part of the country was part of the Russian Empire. In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, when

mobilization for the Russian army began, the local population feared the upcoming front. In 1915, the tsarist authorities ordered evacuation and it was Orthodox priests who actively urged people to leave their homes to evacuate.

The migration route used by residents of the surrounding areas to flee from the war passed through Narewka and further through the Puszcza Białowieska to Próżany, and then deeper into the Russian Empire. This historical period was called *Bieżeństwo*: from the Belarusian expression *bezhenstvo* (*бежанства*) – exile. As Aneta Prymaka-Oniszk (2016) wrote in her book *Bieżeństwo 1915. Zapomniani uchodźcy*, 800,000 local residents decided to flee only from the Grodno Governorate.<sup>13</sup> In total, between two and three million people escaped. The chronicle of the St. Nicholas The Miracle Maker Orthodox Church records: “Testimony to the *bezhenstvo* and to the participation of Narewka residents in the World War are the memorial crosses put up around the Narewka Orthodox Church by returning parishioners” (*Chronicle* 2002). After the return of *bieżeńcy* in 1915, a new cemetery was established in Narewka and the crosses still remind local inhabitants of their historical exile.

Almost 110 years after *Bieżeństwo*, Podlasie is on the migration route again. Nearby cemeteries become the last home for asylum seekers. More than twenty people on the move are buried in local cemeteries located in Narewka,<sup>14</sup> Wólka Terechowska, Saki, Bohoniki, Sokółka, Białowieża, Krynki, Dubicze Cerkiewne, Koroszczyń, and Janów Podlaski. According to Border Deaths Monitoring Group (BDMG 2025), at least 102 people have died on the Polish–Belarusian border due to border violence. Graves are located on both sides of the border in cemeteries and forests – many of them will never be found. Sometimes, families make efforts to repatriate the bodies or their remains to the countries of origin.<sup>15</sup>

Historically, the space of the church held a unique autonomy, with the influence of civic law effectively stopping at the gates of the church. This allowed individuals considered to be outside the law to find refuge within its walls. The origins of this practice can be traced

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<sup>13</sup> The Grodno Governorate is a historic area (since the partition of Poland until it regained its independence) that includes today's eastern part of the Podlaskie Voivodeship, as well as the oblasts of Brest and Grodno, and a fragment of the Alytaus apskritis in Lithuania.

<sup>14</sup> It is Orthodox, and now also serves as the municipal cemetery. Slightly away, but still away from the graves of the local population, there are also four graves of people on the move. The first of them belongs to a 41-year-old Nigerian, Ganiolu Olashile Raji, who died on December 7, 2021 near Olchowka, less than half a kilometer away from people's houses. Two other graves belong to the 24-year-old Yemeni, Mugahed Mohsen Ahmed Al-Huwaisek, and a 21-year-old Syrian, Mr. Waseem. In the middle of February, they contacted the alarm phone of Grupa Granica. They survived at least one pushback. They were exhausted and just about to cross the river Narewka, but they never managed to step out onto the bank at the other side. Four months later, on June 20, 2023, activists collecting clothes from the river to reuse them in humanitarian interventions, accidentally found their bodies. Their funeral gathered the local community and activists. Orthodox priest even invited the Tatar community imam to pray at their graves during the ceremony. The last grave belongs to an unknown person, whose remains were found in the forest in January 2023.

<sup>15</sup> According to Polish law, the family needs to cover the cost of such repatriation. If they cannot do it, or when it is impossible to find the family, the cost of the burial is covered by the municipal government.

back to ancient Greece, where the term *asylon* (gr. ἄσυλον), meaning “invulnerable”, was used to describe sacred areas around statues or altars where no one – fugitives, criminals, or slaves – could be violated (Mourão Permoser 2022). Common in the medieval age, the decline of the church asylum in the 17th century was viewed as progress and a triumph of the rule of law (Mitchell 2017). Still, many hold onto this practice as an alternative form of justice and a last resort for the falsely accused. This conviction, together with the spatial tradition of the church as a sacred space, was mobilized again in the 20th century. In the 1980s, the sanctuary movement in the United States emerged to protect individuals fleeing violence and persecution exacerbated by the U.S. foreign policy in Central America (Mourão Permoser 2022). By the early 2000s, the movement evolved into a protest against migration policies. Similarly, several European countries, with Germany leading the way, revived the tradition of the church asylum during the 1980s to provide shelter and support to those facing deportation, protecting them until their cases could be reviewed. Today, churches in Germany offer refuge to asylum seekers who, under the Dublin Regulation, are supposed to return to the first country of the European Union they entered – even if they have experienced violence and inhumane treatment in those states, such as Poland. Although there are no official rights to church asylum, the state tends to respect this practice, largely due to concerns about public backlash if sacred spaces were violated (Neufert 2014; Mourão Permoser 2022). In Poland, a predominantly Catholic nation, the debate surrounding the role of the church in providing shelter to those fleeing persecution despite their legal status resurfaced in 2015 and again in 2021, but without tangible results.

We conduct the last part of the borderwalk outside the cemetery. This order is intentional. Ending the walk there is practical – the cemetery is the furthest point from where we start at the border wall. Unlike other sites, it can be visited after dusk, which is important if the borderwalk takes place in the afternoon. This sequence is also strategic and political. The cemetery is undoubtedly the most poignant part of the experience, evoking a wide range of affects and emotions as it confronts the walkers with tangible consequences of the border regime. However, we sometimes question this order and suggest an alternative that ends at the site of the station camp in the forest. This sequence may be more accurate: while the Podlasie cemetery has become the final resting place for some people on the move, most of them manage to complete the forest portion of their journey and continue onward.

When we reach the cemetery gate, we introduce the historical context about the region mentioned above, provide information on the border deaths and those who are buried at the graveyard. We conclude the borderwalk by noting that in the past, cemeteries, just like churches, had a unique autonomy – secular law effectively ended at the gates of the cemetery (Majuk n. d.). This meant that cemeteries became spaces where people considered “outlaws” could seek refuge. We end with the question of whether this is the form of asylum that the Polish state intends to offer its visitors. After a brief pause for reflection, we give the participants time to enter the cemetery and pay their respects.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we introduced the method generated through the experience of regular walks through the borderscape. We aimed to provide an insight into the content of the walk, not solely for informational purposes, but to demonstrate how borderwalk is put into practice and how we recognize and address methodological and ethical dilemmas. Grounding our reflection in the theoretical framework of borderscape allowed us to grasp the dynamic character of the border, expanding beyond the borderline and encompassing both physical elements and various practices.

The borderwalk, as we called it, serves both as a research method and a way to present data. Over the years, through our activist and academic work on the border, we gathered information and produced knowledge in conversation with other academics, researchers, and activists, in the space facilitated by *Badaczki i Badacze na Granicy / Researchers on the Border and beyond*. During the borderwalk, research into the border infrastructure, local history, and changes to the legal system are all presented before their material manifestations, such as the border wall, abandoned station camps (and the forest itself), and the cemetery. In this way, static research findings are brought back to the spatial environment that they describe serving as a “pretext” for new observations, enhancing the empirical and theoretical understanding among co-walkers. In that moment, new knowledge is also produced. In addition to published research, the most important sources of knowledge that enhance our understanding of borderwork are testimonies shared by people on the move, both during our activist interventions or collected by fellow activists from the *We Are Monitoring* association. Although we rarely quote them directly, they provide a new angle, centering the lived experience of violence, which is reflected in our proposed method and the analysis shared in those very places where violence occurred.

The borderwalk can be further conceptualized in a conversation with similar walking methods applied in other borderscapes, acknowledging the local context – both in terms of physical infrastructures and practices (e.g., a swollen border river instead of a wall, an official or unofficial camp instead of a forest space) – and to the particularities of power dynamics. This way of structuring the gaze of fellow walkers allows the borderscape to be experienced in a physical way, by connecting body, mind, and the environment, which increases one’s cognitive capacity. It has the potential to influence social change by mobilizing allyship and solidarity with people on the move without disturbing them on their way. It is also an important element of taking responsibility for the violence done by the members of one’s own majority group.

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## HODANJE POGRANIČNIM KRAJOLIKOM: ŠETNJA GRANICOM KAO METODA PREDSTAVLJANJA I PRIKUPLJANJA PODATAKA

Od jeseni 2021. godine prostor poljsko-bjeloruske granice uvelike se militarizira i koristi kao oružje. Turističke staze kroz šumu počele su se nevidljivo križati s rutom iregulariziranih migracija. Članak uvodi koncept "šetnje granicom" kao metodu predstavljanja i prikupljanja podataka, kao i analize pograničnog krajolika. Utjelovljeno iskustvo zajedničkog hodanja ima spoznajnu funkciju te potiče solidarnost s ljudima u pokretu i drugim akterima krize na granici. Oslanjajući se na iskustvo iz više od dvadeset šetnji s istraživačima, studentima, aktivistima i novinarima, autorice predlažu metodološku refleksiju koja može poslužiti kao vodič kroz pogranični krajolik i samu metodu šetnje granicom. Čitatelja vode kroz ključne točke šetnje – zid, šumu, groblje – apostrofirajući etičke dileme na koje se putem nailazi.

Ključne riječi: krajolik, pogranični krajolik, šetnja granicom, iregularizirane migracije, poljsko-bjeloruska granica, nasilje na granici